CHILDREN AND ANXIETY: AN INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA PRICE

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Stephen Duclos: This is an interview with Jessica Price. She's licensed in Massachusetts and Florida as a Social Worker and works with children, teens, and families. We're going to be talking today about working with children and teens in a conflicted world. So, Jess, have you seen an increase in anxiety in school-age children and teens?

Jessica Price: I think it's a resounding yes. Anxiety has increased overall. I think the more concerning issue is how the anxiety is being expressed. There are larger system concerns because school systems are exacerbated. They have labor shortages and worker shortages; the workers that they do have on their brick-and-mortar campuses are not trained to deal with some of the behavioral, mental health, and social crises that students are experiencing. There's also what we call COVID-regression, which is symptoms you see with children, particularly in elementary and middle schools, who were not really social for a couple of years.

The structure and routines that are quite typical if you don't have those gaps are beginning to present themselves in a less covert way. Anxiety used to present itself with kids who would be quiet or cry or maybe do kind of small refusals; now we're seeing much more overt behavioral responses, such as refusing to leave a classroom, aggression towards peers and staff, self-targeting—where children kind of begin to do things to hurt themselves. In elementary schools you see that more with kids who might punch themselves or do something to self-inflict, and in middle schools and high schools you see more peer-to-peer combat and assault against teachers. So, we're definitely seeing anxiety as a whole in society increase, which means that family systems are experiencing their own anxieties. And then kids are going to school with staff that are very anxious.

And, you know, the academic expectations keep marching on. There's this idea that we're not going to make changes in academics so the benchmarks have not changed and actually a lot of things that were taken away in COVID are being implemented back into systems that have really not recovered. And kids have definitely not fully recovered. So, I guess the answer is yes; a lot of

resounding yes. We have a lot of talented staff who are really looking to help who are trained to academically to be in these places; they're not necessarily trained for the social-emotional, mental health, and behavioral challenges that they're experiencing. So, systems are in chaos.

Stephen Duclos: So, do you see it as more of a crisis kind of thing?

Jessica Price: Yes. I think when I work with families who also have members of their family who are working in schools, there is vicarious traumatization. There's definitely trauma that's being experienced on a day-to-day basis, in particular for guidance counselors and social workers in school, because there may be one guidance counselor or social worker in a very large school, or they may be bouncing from school to school, and may be the only mental health resource in a community. Staff members report feeling very burned out, but when you actually begin to do the work with them, you can see edges of trauma there.

Stephen Duclos: Are there any differences between Massachusetts and Florida?

Jessica Price: Massachusetts has more resources. Their focus, in particular with students with disabilities and for students who receive services through a 504 plan or an IEP, an Individual Education Plan, are far more resource based. They're still limited and they're still lacking but they definitely have more staff trained to do this work and I think they have more of an infrastructure to do the work. In Florida you don't see that focus. You don't see that same resource delivery. So, as a result of the resources which are just absent or significantly depleted in Florida, you see an increase in violence, hospitalization, suicidality.

There's also a gap in training. If your student is on an IEP or a 504 but they're in three to five classrooms a day with staff members who are not trained to deliver those services, then they're not really receiving they're services. They can get pulled out or they can get push-in services, but the difficulty is that if the disability isn't articulated or assessed correctly, or even if it is assessed correctly and you have a beautiful plan, if you don't have staff to implement it, you have kids who really struggle throughout the day. In elementary school you see those kids who don't feel that they can keep up with the academics. In middle schools, you see it as shutdowns or a kind of control-avoid response. The anxiety is going to result in a control or avoid response.

Middle school is hard enough. I think now, what you're seeing is academic loss based on the idea of gaps in foundational education and a lack of socialization. You're seeing developmental social skills that are lost. And then you're having a sensory bombardment: kids that are just feeling very overwhelmed in a sensory way, going from being kind of isolated—for multiple years for some kids —into these spaces of school buildings can feel very chaotic and their energy is scary sometimes. It creates a very complex equation with a lot of different variables. complex equation with a lot of different variables.

Stephen Duclos: Some students have done well at working at home. Actually, some students have done much better at home than they ever did in a brick-and mortar classroom.

Jessica Price: Yeah, so students that are doing well tend to be more independent, more able to complete work on their own, do better with more flexible time frames so they can do a bunch of work and then they can take breaks from work. So, when you're thinking about the idea of a student who really did well in a virtual environment, you're thinking about a student who's able to organize their work and manage their work and then also have a work-play differential. They also are the same students that were able to find social groups that allowed them to continue in their social development. However, many of these were online social groups. So, in those cases, the technology aspect actually was a resource for many students in the sense that they were able to go at their own pace. They had a nice technology social group that they felt comforted by, they had a family system and resources within their family system that were able to assist them through this process, and they didn't feel isolated and alone and exacerbated with parents who were also feeling a lack of resource.

When you think about it from the standpoint of what are the family resources, what are the individual student resources—their cognitive, developmental, and social ability—and then how effective were their emotional coping strategies, resourcefulness, or their resiliency, I think that you can see kids who did exceptionally well during that time. They may have even struggled to go back, or they found hybrids where they're able to go back for short amounts of time to not get overwhelmed by the brick-and-mortar environment but still have some kind of live interaction with peer groups while they do the majority of their academics online. This allows them not to have to deal with these staff shortages or teachers that are just not trained to do the work that they're being hired to do.

Stephen Duclos: Ok. What about stresses on parents and parenting? What have you observed there?

Jessica Price: The stressors that we're seeing with parents is that they are very overwhelmed. They're confused about how to parent. There's a huge technology problem in the sense that the amount of time kids are spending in technology play and then a lack of other play, like a lack of social play or free play. There's a lack of structure—chores, routines, responsibilities. There's almost a sense of not developing the reciprocal relationships, both the social peer reciprocal relationship and also the household or family system reciprocal relationship that comes from those rules of play, such as when we begin to play with others, we have to learn to share, how to communicate, how to get our needs met, and also understand other people's needs.

With that, we are also moving away from traditional play in school systems, as well as family systems. We have children who are inadequately able to participate in their family system in the same way that their parents participated in their family-of-origin system. So, there's a sense of kind

of, "What do I do? How do I take this technology away—this phone, this iPod, this laptop away—and what do I do when they refuse?…When I do take it away and they have an enormous tantrum that feels very aggressive and almost like a crisis, how do I trust that my child will come back?"

I think that the academic expectations on kids has dramatically increased and the amount of time spent in academic environments and doing schoolwork has also dramatically increased. And so, that balance is off as well. And then parents are also having to work and deal with the household and this kind of fluctuating relationship with space that we're in: Are kids in school or out of school? Can we go to after-school programs and summer camps or are these after-school programs going to be online?

It's hard to find mental health professionals, family therapists, social workers, licensed mental health clinicians, because quite frankly they're all full. Or families don't have the money to find the resource, or if they can find the resource, they don't have the money to obtain the resource for an extended period of time.

And then are also time constraints. What do you do when you have middle school kids who are starting school at 9:30 and going to school until almost five o'clock and they have two hours of homework? How do you manage getting anything else done in that type of schedule?

So, I think that families—parents in particular—are very overwhelmed, and I think that a lot of that stress and anxiety is coming from a sense of "How do I raise kids now?" The number one fear seems to be: "I feel like I'm losing my child to technology and I don't know how to stop it."

Stephen Duclos: Well, this brings us to: How do we do therapy in a world in which there's lots of conflict, in a world where there's lots of technology? How are you managing the back-and-forth between trying to work in person and now mostly doing most of our work on Zoom?

Jessica Price: Yeah, so telehealth, especially 100% telehealth. More recently, therapists are being able to go back and start to do home or community visits. We're still not able to get into school systems so, you know, that's a change. So, where you might've been a therapist who did some wraparound work where you would work with a family in their home, do some office work, and go see some students who are maybe struggling in other environments such as school environments or after school environments, and have access to all of those environments pretty freely…that's just very different work, right? That gives you so much building space to work with kids and families and move them forward and progress them in a way where you have a very large understanding of what the day-to-day is. What do kids look like when they walk through their day and what do families look like as they're walking through their day, their week, their month.

When COVID hit, we went to 100% telehealth, which was a huge change. Not being in the room with people—how do you play with a kid who's four or five or six? How do you do family therapy?

So, what we've done is we've adapted , and we begin to do mirroring work: so, I'll have kids bring a snack and we'll eat together and that makes us feel connected. I'll have a parent stay in the room —in particular with a kid who may be a little behavioral or suffering from extreme anxiety or insecurity--but I'll shadow them, I'll background them and have them work in. If there are animals in the home, you work the animals in as a little bit of a break, so you're able to talk about animals. I also sometimes have dogs in my room, which is a way of joining: "Oh, you have dogs, I have dogs." So, you're looking for ways of kind of joining and mirroring in a video.

Having toys around you that you can pick up and play with, asking them where their toys are, and then having them bring them and show you their toys and how those toys work. Invite your families to play a game all together and have somebody move pieces for you so that you can be part of the game and they feel like they're bringing you in. You can align as a team with one person and you play a game together.

Puppets are also significantly helpful for much younger kids. And allowing them to move through the room but also be contained in one room. Sometimes we have multiple screens, so if we have teenagers, I have the teenager sitting in their room on a screen, I have parents in another room on a screen so that there's some separation that allows a little bit for some distance—some developmental distance—that really does allow us to move forward within the family system. Eleven-to-thirteen year old kids are pretty good on screens. They can do the Zoom work and the screen work.

But you do have to shorten the session, so you're not going to do an hour long session; you move to half hour sessions and then you ask them at the end of every session, out of the practice of giving them some empowerment and some autonomy, "What do you want to do? Do you want to see me next week? Do you want to see me in two weeks? Do you feel like we're ready for once a month?" So, you give them a sense of empowerment in guiding the work which also helps you join.

Stephen Duclos: We're making some assumptions here about technology: that everyone has it, that everyone has access to it, and that everyone can use it efficiently. But this isn't necessarily the case with all kinds of populations. So, what's going on with that? How are we addressing these gaps?

Jessica Price: Well, school systems have kind of remedied some of the issues with technology during COVID—in particular in my rural and agricultural spaces here in Florida. I work primarily in Hillsbury County in Florida. It's a very large school district—I think it's like the seventh largest school district in the country and it really does work with urban as well as suburban and rural spaces. And so school systems when covid hit had to push technology into communities. Now, there definitely is struggle around—in particular in some of my rural spaces not necessarily in having a computer but in having internet access that stays on. You know, with technology you do have technology glitches; you're going to have family systems that may not be able to have wifi

that is reliable. And in those cases you really do have to move back into the community. You have to do home visits. May you have to do phone calls. We could meet outside and in parks. So, you have to be more creative with families who don't have reliable internet or who maybe don't have technology. Although, like I said, school systems were pushing technology out into their communities because they had to; that was the way that they had access.

Stephen Duclos: Have you noticed any differences between white students and students of color and students with disabilities?

Jessica Price: Yeah, absolutely. More at-risk populations are always going to experience transitions and crisis in a more exacerbated way. My students with disabilities became more isolated. I had many students whose disabilities didn't allow them to access technology at all. The students that have visual or auditory impairment, suffer with sensory integration, or just generally have high anxiety just don't have the same access to the curriculum, even inside the classroom. And so, of course, trying to have one teacher who's managing twelve or twenty or thirty students who are all in different environments with students who are shutting off computers or walking away. There were just gaps, and students weren't progressing. They weren't receiving any real instruction that was meaningful to them. My students that tend to be resource-deprived and/or suffer from unique learning styles and learning challenges were just not able to gain access.

And then they were in family systems that were also super exacerbated, as well as the child welfare problem. When you begin to talk about family systems who rely on resources in these larger systems to assist their children moving forward and progressing academically, developmentally, socially, and emotionally, and all of those systems all of a sudden were in crisis and chaos and had no idea how to even access them, we have years of loss there that we're just not going to get back. That's what we call covid-regression.

We have students who are in second grade, for instance, who are exhibiting behaviors and interactions with peers on a four-to-six-year-old space and they're eight or nine. I have ten-, eleven-year-olds who should be really moving into pre-teen behavior who are struggling with keeping their bodies still and knowing how to make eye-contact. I have high schoolers who even after they went back to school spent eight to ten hours in a house alone, anxious and isolated. The idea of then pushing these kids out into work environments or college environments when they're two, three years delayed in developmental stages and social-emotional spaces with no therapist, no assistance for families is devastating. And that's a majority of families who are families that have disability and also families of color.

Anytime that we have a lack of resources in a day-to-day space, kids are going to school and they're kind of doing what they need to be doing; boom, COVID hits, nobody's going anywhere, and there's a resource depletion and absence of socialization, you don't leave your house, you don't see others the same age, and then boom, right back in. So, you have to think: kids thrive on

consistency and predictability and when we've now had every year a very significant change in their fundamental structure and challenges of schedule like going to school and coming home, going to after-school and coming home, and that those things are chronically transitioning, how do you find grounding? How do you find stability? How do you reduce the anxiety that they feel that nothing stays the same?

Stephen Duclos: This leads me to the final question about social development and sexual development. Teachers and therapists are reporting what we're starting to call COVID-regressionsas affecting social and sexual development. What are there any differences you've observed in Florida and Massachusetts in terms of social and sexual development?

Jessica Price: I think that those things are similar. You're going to have differences between the communities. The states are very different and also their seasons are very different. Here in Florida —because the seasons are not as significant and also there was a lot of sending kids out into the world even during this time—you do see differences but a lot of similarities. The social and sexual development have been delayed. If you think about the idea of sexual development, how do you move from a stage where you're in a middle school environment—age twelve, thirteen. You are beginning the process of understanding desire and attraction, you're trying on playfulness, and you're moving into sexual play in a way that's very developmentally appropriate. How do you do that if you're all by yourself?

There was the technological aspect of things that was interesting where there were groups of middle schoolers who had whole groups around identity and desire and attraction and moving into relationships in an online way. When they went back to face-to-face learning, they at least had a little bit of foundation there; they were trying some stuff on. A lot of other students just didn't have that. So, you definitely are seeing delays.

Now fast forward. Now these kids who were supposed to be in middle school and never went out for half a year, now they're in high school and high school. You're dating, there's prom, there's this, there's that. There's a social structure in high school around dating, attraction, and sexual relationships. And you're having students who are entering into that with a gap. You either have kids and teens who are checking out of this altogether—"I'm going to just stay in my room and I'm just not going to do this"—which then increases their anxiety, their depression, their suicidality, their self-injury. If you're not taking the healthy risk of moving into relationships, then you're taking unhealthy risks, right?

And then figuring it out and trying to play catch up, again, without a resource. If you have a therapist who you're working through your relationship and friendship challenges, at least it gives you a way of feeling grounded and supported. If you don't have those things—which school systems do not have in place—then it's kind of a free-for-all of kids who are isolated or overdoing. And then you are also having all of the other mental health challenges that come with that.

Stephen Duclos: I really can't let you go before I sort of talk about something contemporaneously and that's the… You know, one of the differences between Massachusetts and Florida is the "Don't say gay" and the attack on trans children. Although these are kind of new, I'm wondering if you've seen any effects even now, even just a few weeks after these…

Jessica Price: Of course. This is where the weaponizing of the child welfare system and kind of the police state that some of these states like Texas—and Florida's following suit—are beginning to push families into a space of secrecy. And when you are experiencing transition and you're having families that are experiencing transition—in all senses of the word—and now we're putting, you propaganda out there that therapists can only work with families like this and we have to report and we're mandated reporters; it really sets up a wall. How do you trust a therapist to work with you and your family when you're getting all of these news alerts and these news bulletins that are saying that they want therapists to be filing as if there's abuse and neglect, even though that's now what's happening.

Therapists are feeling afraid. Families are pulling out of therapy out of fear of this weaponizing of child welfare. My school staff is saying to me, "Are you kidding me? Do you have no idea what is going on in public education? Do you have no idea the crisis that these children are in and now you're going to add another layer of misunderstanding, hate, and going after a group of students who are on their own working through cultivating and assimilating into our culture and society?" It's a mess. And it's quite frankly infuriating. It's infuriating that states are trying to determine how we do our work with a huge lack of understanding of the crisis that children and teens and young adults are facing. It's heartbreaking.

Stephen Duclos: Okay. Thank you so much for taking time to share your experience with us!